

## Cantor's Column: Whose *Minhag*, Anyway?: Reflections on Contemporary American Jewish Musical Diversity

I'm on a plane returning to New Jersey from Austin, Texas where I spent the last three days attending the Women Cantors Network conference. A bit of a misnomer, since the WCN, as it's known to its members, is not restricted to cantors, or for that matter, to women. Its current By-Laws allows women and men to join the organization, although out of 301 members at current count I know of only two men. Moreover, there are no specific membership requirements of any kind. This goal of 'extreme inclusiveness' has fostered an environment with some interesting effects. Since joining WCN in 2005, I've learned that there are myriads of ways of being Jewish in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. All stripes and types are represented at the annual gathering which has convened in places like Boston, Washington, Cleveland, Boca Raton, and now, Shalom Y'all, Texas. I can surely report that Jewish diversity is alive and well and has traveled many literal and figurative miles from *Sepharad*, *Ashkenaz* and the *Mizrach*.

This broad diversity of backgrounds inside the American, and for that matter, international Jewish tent allows for a tremendous amount of stimulation. Over the course of three days, the assembled *daven* together for three weekday *Ma'Ariv* services and three weekday *Shacharit* services. Each service is lead by a different person, usually with additional persons assisting with instruments ranging from guitars, clarinets, flutes, all types of drums, tambourines and other percussion instruments. (I've even offered to conduct a service next year or perhaps a workshop introducing my compositions for the Friday night Shabbat service composed according to Nusach, the traditional model system of the Orthodox and Conservative movements.)

Perhaps the biggest 'take-away' from this pan-denominational experience of music as practiced today in our American synagogues and chavurot is that in all denominations other than Orthodox and Conservative, music has taken on the mantle of 'big business'. Over the course of the three days, both in services and workshops, I heard dozens of songs, in both Hebrew and English, that to my mind reflected a 'dumbing down' of musical expression. Most of what I heard were basically wordless chants or campfire melodies. Yet, this in great part is what has awakened the Reformed community and brought thousands of new members into their synagogues. The Reform movement has the only profitable Jewish music publishing arm in America, Transcontinental.

It is true that we at B'nai Jacob have embraced many modern aspects to the worship experience: We are egalitarian with lay and clerical leadership that includes women. We have musical accompaniment on Friday nights. These are big steps toward change. But, in my view, even more musical innovation can be a good thing for our congregation and community. On Saturday mornings, at the commencement of *Shacharit* (around 9:30 AM or so, if you'd like to hear it), I've begun to use a setting of a *Piyut*, a Jewish liturgical poem, that I composed music for. The music is a congregational tune and the words are in *Siddur Sim Shalom* in both Hebrew and English. What's so nice about this is that congregants who do not understand Hebrew and normally are singing texts they do not understand, the *Shachar Avakeshcha*, alternates between Hebrew and English. Everyone sings, I think, because everyone gets it. After all, most of us understand English!

Meaning matters. And that's where my experience in Milwaukee comes in. Two Shabbats ago, I served as Guest Cantor and Scholar/Composer-in-Residence for Congregation Beth El Ner Tamid in Mequan, a suburb of Milwaukee. In advance of the Sunday Shalsholet International Festival of New Jewish Liturgical Music held on June 25 and 26, the Shabbat of June 23 and 24 gave local Milwaukee congregations the opportunity to spend time with the awardees, hear some of their compositions and learn about the composers' creative process. The congregation I visited, a Conservative congregation, had only recently voted to allow musical instruments during the Kabbalat Shabbat services. I was to be 'the guinea pig', giving the congregation's clergy – Cantor Berkowitz and Rabbi Berman – an opportunity to experience their congregation's reaction without either of them directly taking the fall. To everyone's benefit [surprise? relief? delight?], the congregation enthusiastically sang along and enjoyed the 'Ruach' that an instrumental accompaniment can motivate. Now the congregation can move comfortably forward with a high comfort level about the change, much as we at B'nai Jacob are feeling now. When Hebrew prayer texts are explored, explained and understood, a congregation's enjoyment and deep engagement can be guaranteed.

On the subject of Jewish musical diversity, however, nothing exemplified it as much as the Shalsholet concert in Milwaukee on Sunday evening. An auditorium on a local college campus, filled with over 300 eager listeners, reverberated with sounds from around the world, with musical styles as numerous as stars in the sky. There were cantorial solos, choral pieces, [and] even a rabbi leading an improvised chanting with an Indian shruti box, an instrument that looks like a small wooden box that sits in one's lap and sounds like a hurdy-gurdy.

I am pleased to report that Cantor Natasha Hirschhorn of Ansche Chesed in Manhattan who sang my *Hashkiveinu* at the concert, accompanied by yours truly on a magnificent Steinway grand piano, sounded truly like an angel of God. The entire Shalsholet experience was a deeply humbling one, being among so many gifted and talented composers and musicians, all of whom have a deep love of Jewish music and a desire to translate that *ahavah* into expressions of Jewish worship. The Shalsholet festival continues on December 12-14 over Shabbat with another concert, as well. Perhaps some of you would like to attend. Of course, all are welcome!

As Sid Canter reports in his column, our June 20<sup>th</sup> Friday Night Live! Musical service and Shabbat dinner was a wonderful experience for all who attended and a terrific ending to the year at B'nai Jacob. I wish you all a relaxing and restful summer!